The Most Beautiful Creature

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The Most Beautiful Creature

by 305unreal

Summary

Will and Hannibal work together to enter Abigail, the rascally black lamb, at a county fair.

The morning sunlight breaks through the slats in the barn, rousing Will from his restless sleep. He rubs the remnants of a dream from his eyes and smiles down at the source of insistent bleating - his precious lamb Abigail.

"Alright girl, I'm up," he says gently while stroking her soft black fleece.

After finishing his chores, Will heads into the pasture where he knows Hannibal will be tending the horses. Sure enough, in the distance, he spots a tall dark-haired figure humming softly as he brushes the great ginger mare.

"Hannibal!" Will calls out, waving excitedly.

Hannibal turns at the sound of Will's voice and waves back, a fond smile lighting up his noble features. As Will recounts his latest plans for training Abigail, Hannibal listens intently.

"I'm sure with your skill and devotion, she will win that contest easily. But just in case, I may have a way to earn the entry money..."

"Oh?" Will looks at him with curiosity and gratitude. "What did you have in mind?"

Hannibal places a gentle hand on Will's shoulder. "I was speaking to Mrs. Komeda, who runs the farm stand in town. Her son has taken ill and she's shorthanded for the harvest. If you're willing, I believe she would pay you and Abigail to help gather vegetables over the weekend."

Will beams. "Of course, we'll help!"

At Hannibal's suggestion, Abigail has proven before that her nimble hooves are useful for more than just gamboling through the pasture. That weekend, the two friends set out toward Mrs. Komeda's farm outside of town, and Abigail cheerfully keeps pace beside them. When they arrive, the elderly woman greets them warmly.

"I have more crops ready for harvest than I can handle alone," Mrs. Komeda explains, leading them out to the fields.

Rows of vegetables stretch as far as the eye can see - tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, and more, heavy with ripeness. Will takes charge of instructing Abigail which treats to offer as encouragement. To the delight of all watching, Abigail proves remarkably adept. She follows Will's commands to gently pluck vegetables from the vines with her teeth, then drop them carefully into the baskets attached to her harness. Soon, Abigail empties several rows with her diligent work. Mrs. Komeda tends to the sold produce at her roadside stand each day, so the boys help clean and sort what Abigail has gathered. Hannibal notices Abigail eyeing the lush grass longingly in between tasks. Ever thoughtful, he takes her to graze while Will and Mrs. Komeda work. But Abigail refuses to relax, helping himself to tufts of grass she can pull up and bring back for Will to gather seeds from. By the end of that long weekend, weary but satisfied, the three have made great progress on the harvest thanks to Abigail's multifaceted aid. Mrs. Komeda insists they stay for a nourishing meal before returning home as twilight falls.

"Bless you boys for coming. I don't know how I would have managed alone!" She pays them generously for their labor.

On the walk home, Will bounces with joy, grasping the money tight. "Thank you for thinking of this, Hannibal. With Abigail's help and your good idea, we just might win that contest after all."

Hannibal smiles proudly at this clever lamb and his dear friend. The next few weeks fly by in a flurry of activity as Will puts Abigail through an intensive training regimen in preparation for the contest. Every day after his chores, he can be found in the pasture working patiently with his lamb, teaching her new tricks and maneuvers through gentle commands and praise. Hannibal comes to observe their progress whenever his duties allow. He's full of thoughtful suggestions to refine Abigail's performance.

"Encourage her with your voice rather than the crook when you want her to turn. She responds best to you."

Will tries Hannibal's method and is surprised by Abigail's immediate response. She bleats happily at the praise lavished upon her. Hannibal continues to smile knowingly at their success. At last, the day of the county fair arrives. Will polishes Abigail's hooves until they shine, then ties a bright ribbon around her neck.

"You'll be the most beautiful creature there, I just know it!" he tells her.

Hannibal arrives at the farm in his elegant buggy. "My family has a booth to showcase our prized horses. I've saved you a spot in the shade to watch Abigail compete."

Will beams. "Thank you for everything, Han. I couldn't have done this without your help and belief in us."

As Will and Hannibal walk into the bustling county fairgrounds, Abigail seems enchanted by all the colorful sights and sounds. Will leads her carefully through the crowds to register for the livestock competitions. He joins the line nervously clutching Abigail's lead, hoping they aren't too late. When it's their turn, the registration clerk glances at Will's worn clothing doubtfully.

"Entry fee is $5," he states gruffly.

But before Will can respond, Hannibal steps forward holding out the money. "Here you are, sir. William Graham and his lamb Abigail, competing in the showmanship category."

The clerk begrudgingly hands them their entry badge.

Will turns to Hannibal with grateful eyes shining. "You didn't have to do that, my friend. But I promise to pay you back, with interest!"

Hannibal smiles. "Consider it an investment that I expect great returns from."

After securing Abigail in their staging area, Will gathers the equipment he'll need. He pauses anxiously, second-guessing his plan. But Hannibal’s steadying presence buoys his confidence.

"You and Abigail were made for this. Now go out there and show them what you can do."

With a deep breath, Will leads Abigail into the ring at their assigned time. As Will enters the showmanship ring, he scans the other competitors warily. A shiny white goat named Marissa holds herself proudly, while Cassie the curly-wool sheep eyes them shrewdly. The largest is Nicholas, a gruff-looking pig. Abigail takes it all in stride, greeting the animals happily. Only one, a gangly brown and white lamb called Georgia, seems shyly lonely. Abigail nuzzles her new friend reassuringly. The judges call for the demonstrations to begin. Marissa's owner has her dancing and pirouetting showily around the ring, soaking up cheers from the stands. But when Cassie leapfrogs over her owner, even the judges look unsettled. Nicholas merely stands bored, heedless to his farmer's pleas. Will swallows hard, hoping Abigail will remember their lessons. At his whistle, she prances over nimbly to be groomed and have her hooves checked.

From the Lecter booth, Hannibal watches proudly as Abigail then herds around colorful plastic obstacles. Her bond with Will is clear; she hangs on his every word. When the demonstration ends, Abigail and Georgia bleat their farewells sadly. The judges tally scores. Will fidgets, only calming when Hannibal rests a hand on his shoulder in reassurance. After an excruciating wait, and with the demonstrations complete, the judges announce the next phase of the competition - a test without human assistance. Will feels nervous for Abigail but knows this is her chance to shine.

Each animal is led to a separate pen. On a signal, gates open releasing them one by one into an obstacle course. First is mighty Nicholas, but after snuffling the obstacles, he simply lays down for a nap. Marissa flounces about, preening for onlookers, until a twist knocks her off balance. Steady Cassie weaves through steadily on sturdy legs. But Georgia, skittish alone, gets turned around and balks at the hay bales. Then it's Abigail's turn. Trusting in Will's training, she trots out confidently. At each challenge - weaving cones, crawling through tunnels, scaling miniature hills - Abigail meets with aplomb. Her friendliness keeps Georgia on track too. By the course's end, both ewes are bleating excitedly, having helped each other complete all tasks.

Will grins wide, gripping Hannibal's arm. "I just know she's got this one in the bag!"

The judges tally the combined marks, conferring closely. The crowd hushes and, with bated breath, Will and Hannibal watch as the head judge steps forward, clutching a blue ribbon.

"This year's champion in the livestock showmanship competition," the judge announces loudly, "goes to William Graham and his exceptional lamb, Abigail!"

Will gasps in elation and disbelief. Hannibal sweeps him into a joyful embrace as the spectators burst into applause. Down in the ring, Abigail leaps and bleats, clearly celebrating her victory. As Will accepts the ribbon and prize money, he notices shy little Georgia being comforted by Abigail.

"It seems your lamb has made a new friend," Hannibal observes.

Later, as the fair begins to wind down, Will finds Georgia's owner, an older teen named Donald. "My lamb and I owe our win to your Georgia's help. Please, take this small token of our gratitude."

He presses some of the reward money into Donald's hand. Weeks afterward, the memories of Abigail's triumph still buoy Will's spirit on the farm. But greater than any ribbon is knowing he and Abigail have proven themselves.

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